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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
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INFO EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TBILISI 002964

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR DAS BRYZA AND EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/25/2017
TAGS: PREL PGOV GG
SUBJECT: TBILISI UPDATE: 11/26/07

REF: A. TBILISI 2948
 B. TBILISI 2935

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Saakashvili Resigns, Declares Candidacy

¶1. (U) As expected, on November 25 President Saakashvili resigned to launch his re-election campaign. The resignation is required for early presidential elections. The Parliament approved Saakashvili's proposal of January 5 elections by 148 to 1. Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze has become acting president; Deputy Speaker Mikheil Machavariani will become Parliament Speaker. This is the second time Burjanadze has served as acting president; the first time was in 2003 following Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation during the Rose Revolution, prior to Saakashvili's election in January 2004.

Protests In Support of Imedi TV are Peaceful

¶2. (U) An estimated 20,000 - 30,000 protesters gathered in Tbilisi's Rike Square November 25 for a peaceful three-hour demonstration demanding the immediate restoration of Imedi TV. The protest, organized by the nine-party United National Council of Opposition (UNC), marched to the front of the parliament building before disbanding. Conservative Party MP Zviad Dzidziguri said protest rallies would continue if Imedi didn't resume broadcasting in a few days. Prior to this protest, on November 22, opposition youth activists held brief protest rallies outside of Rustavi 2, Mze TV, and the Georgian Public Broadcast channel to call on them to express solidarity with Imedi TV. Journalists from several Tbilisi-based media outlets signed a petition calling for the immediate resumption of Imedi broadcasts.

Government Holds Televised Cabinet Meeting

¶3. (U) On November 24 before Saakashvili's resignation, new Prime Minister Lado Gurgenidze chaired his first cabinet meeting, which was televised live. Saakashvili told the cabinet the next forty days (while he is out of office) would be an important test for the government. He called on the ministers to continue to govern with a strong democratic mandate and to focus on security and public order to prevent "provocations." Saakashvili urged the government to immediately launch all planned social assistance programs. Gurgenidze emphasized these social programs would not be paid for with new taxes, but suggested they might be covered by slowing down planned infrastructure projects. Saakashvili also said other changes remained possible for members of his government, telling them the behavior of the government would be closely monitored in the period leading to elections. Burjanadze said she hoped the cabinet would be "seriously refreshed" following the January 5 election. The cabinet, along with new Prime Minister Lado Gurgenidze, won a confidence vote 155 to 0 in Parliament November 22.

National Movement Party Holds Congress November 23

¶4. (U) The ruling National Movement held a congress November 23, which aired live, to nominate Saakashvili as its presidential candidate. Tbilisi mayor Gigi Ugulava, PM Gurgenidze, Burjanadze and Saakashvili each spoke to the audience of 17,000. Each speech focused on the need to address social problems and reduce the gap between rich and poor. Burjanadze said the necessary reforms taken by the government since 2003, while painful at times and accompanied by mistakes, should not overshadow the importance of the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili focused his speech on social issues, Georgia's territorial integrity, and Euro-Atlantic integration. He also warned there would be "many provocations" ahead, referring to Russian interference in elections and Badri Patarkatsishvili's efforts to destabilize the Georgian government. Polish President Lech Kaczynski attended the congress.

Ruling Party Shares Internal Poll Results

¶5. (C) National Movement MP and Saakashvili insider Giga Bokeria told Ambassador November 22 the ruling party had done an initial private presidential poll, in Tbilisi only. He reported: Saakashvili had 22% support, UNC presidential

candidate Levan Gachechiladze 14%, Badri Patarkatsishvili 6%, New Rightists MP Davit Gamkrelidze 5%, and Labor Party leader Shalva Natelashvili 3%. The results gave Bokeria confidence that Saakashvili could win a first round victory. In a separate conversation, Speaker Burjanadze expressed more concern, noting that if Saakashvili did not win the first round, the opposition could unify around his remaining challenger in a second round.

Rumors of Pressure to Vote for Saakashvili Continue

¶6. (C) Ambassador raised the issue of alleged pressure on government employees to vote for Saakashvili (Ref A) with Burjanadze November 23. Burjanadze said she had looked into these allegations and determined there were a few National Movement officials in the Tbilisi City Council who were trying to browbeat city employees into supporting Saakashvili. Burjanadze said she told Saakashvili, who then ordered those responsible to cease and desist. On November 24, Labor Party Executive Secretary Paata Jibladze held a press conference to accuse the ruling party of this blackmail of public sector employees, and said the authorities also had a list of people to remove from voting lists, including prisoners' family members, dismissed employees, and people known to be against the government.

New Rightists Congress Endorses Gamkrelidze

¶7. (U) New Rightists Party held its congress November 24 to formally endorse Davit Gamkrelidze's candidacy for president. The Industrialists and National Democratic parties are also supporting Gamkrelidze. New Rightists MP Irakli Iashvili, a member of the Parliamentary Committee for Economic Policy, was selected as Gamkrelidze's running mate for Prime Minister.

¶8. (U) Gamkrelidze told his supporters if he won the presidential election, he would call for a referendum in April to ask the Georgian public what type of government it wanted, a constitutional monarchy or parliamentary republic. He offered his support to a constitutional monarchy, and added that Patriarch Ilia II could act as regent until a monarch was identified. Gamkrelidze outlined his platform,

including reform of the Interior Ministry, abolishment of compulsory military service, and extensive social programs to aid the poor.

Government Wants Free and Fair Elections

¶ 19. (C) Government officials have stressed to us the importance of ensuring the January 5 elections are perceived as free and fair. Newly appointed head of the National Security Council Alexander Lomaia told the Ambassador November 25 he would be the coordinator for the international community on election issues. Lomaia said he hoped the international community would support a system of exit polling as it had done during the 2003 presidential elections. Acting President Burjanadze and Lomaia encouraged the Ambassador to raise any reports of election-related problems with them.

¶ 10. (U) The Parliament voted November 22 to allow voter registration on polling day, an amendment to the election code in its third and final reading. The opposition is against same-day voter registration, fearing individuals will be able to cast ballots at different polling stations by registering several times. The ruling party emphasized that voters registered the same day as elections will be required to submit copies of their IDs and their votes will be tallied separately.

Requirements to Bid for Presidency

¶ 11. (U) Candidates have until November 26 to declare their candidacy for the early presidential elections. Labor Party leader Shalva Natelashvili was the first to register with the Central Election Commission (CEC). New Rightists Gamkrelidze, oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili, UNC candidate Levan Gachechiladze, Party of Future leader Gia Maisashvili, Russian-leaning Hope Party leader Irina Sarishvili-Chanturia and Saakashvili also registered. The remaining candidates that have expressed to the CEC an intention to run are: Levan Kidzinidze, Elene Tepnadze-Bagrationi, Ivane Tsiklauri, and Tamaz Bibilauri. Each candidate must submit 50,000 signatures supporting their candidacy by December 5 (ref B).

Imedi TV on for a Moment

¶ 12. (SBU) A critical issue for opposition, international observers and Georgians alike is the resumption of broadcasting by Imedi TV. On November 23 Bidzina Baratashvili, managing director of Imedi TV said there has been no direct contact between Imedi and the authorities about reopening the station in early December, despite remarks to that effect by OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti. While Imedi claims the status of its broadcast equipment is unknown following the November 7 closure of the station, on November 25 the station broadcast one George Michael video without sound. General Director Lewis Robertson said the broadcast was done by the Georgian government, presumably to test the signal, not by Imedi.

¶ 13. (SBU) Imedi anchor Inga Grigolia announced she was leaving her job at the television station November 23. Grigolia said she will work with an independent TV studio to produce programs for all channels. Her first project was a November 24 interview with President Saakashvili for an hour and a half, which aired on the pro-government Rustavi 2 channel. Saakashvili said during the interview he had information on "dealings" in London between Patarkatsishvili and opposition candidates to gain opposition support for his presidential campaign. Saakashvili also said he would participate in televised debates if they focused on the issues.

Opposition meets with Polish and Lithuanian Presidents

¶14. (U) Opposition leaders met with Polish President Kaczynski November 23 and Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus November 24. Conservative MP Kakha Kukava said the visits of the two presidents, who came to Georgia to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the Rose Revolution, were a breakthrough as both pledged to do their utmost to resume Imedi TV broadcasts and ensure the January 5 elections were democratic.

TEFFT